

Rules of Debate and Procedure of Meetings

"The Chairman is there to guide the meeting, not to boss it."

Foreword

Many workers have experienced a sense of fear and trepidation when called upon to "take the chair" because they suddenly realise that they are being called upon to undertake a position of responsibility without having the knowledge to enable them to do the job efficiently. Often they invent some excuse for declining the honour whilst inwardly wishing that they could accept.

But even amongst those who do not aspire to the office of Chairman, a knowledge of the rules of procedure is a valuable asset enabling them more intelligently to follow the business of the meeting and to participate in the proceedings instead of being merely passive listeners. It also enables them to assert their rights in the conduct of the meeting if the Chairman behaves in an undemocratic manner towards them.

The importance of a Chairman knowing his job cannot be too strongly emphasised. A Chairman who has a sound knowledge of the rules of debate can occupy his position with complete confidence and knows that he will receive the respect due to his office, even in a meeting where there is a strong difference of opinion.

A Chairman can make all the difference between a successful meeting and a failure. If he is a "good Chairman", he can steer the business through to a successful conclusion, whereas if he is "bad Chairman", he can get himself and the meeting into a hopeless muddle.

Some people are more confident than others, but confidence alone is not sufficient to ensure the orderly conduct of a meeting. A Chairman must have a knowledge of the rules of procedure, otherwise he cannot conduct the business of a meeting efficiently. Confidence without knowledge borders on impudence and an audience will not be long in discovering that weakness.

Preliminaries

From the moment that a meeting opens, whether public or private, to the time that it closes, the Chairman has the responsibility for seeing that it is conducted in an orderly and business-like manner. He does so by guiding the proceedings in accordance with certain established rules, through which he controls the meeting and ensures that the business is dealt with efficiently.

These “Rules of Debate”, as they are called, have not been established by any legal enactment, they have evolved out of common practice and have been defined from time to time by various organisations and business institutions with the result that we have a commonly accepted code of procedure for the management of meetings. In principle, the rules for dealing with motions and amendments arising from any meeting are the same.

Standing Orders

Established organisations and committees usually have their own “Standing Orders” for the regulation of their business meetings. Standing Orders is in fact a set of rules which lay down a specific procedure for the meetings of that organisation or committee and which amplify the common Rules of Debate. It is possible to depart from the Standing Orders providing the meeting agrees.

Agenda and Timetable

An agenda is always necessary at a meeting. It sets out for the guidance of the Chairman the item or items which are to be dealt with by the meeting. It is always advisable for the agenda to be compiled on the basis of a time-table so that provision can be made for all items to be dealt with before the closing time of the meeting. Even at a meeting where there is only one item on the agenda a time-table is necessary if there are to be questions and discussions. In that case a specified time is laid down for the speaker and likewise for the questions and discussion.

During the proceedings the Chairman should aim at conserving time, and if he can keep a little ahead of his time-table, it will provide him with a latitude to cope with unexpected incidents in subsequent items. It is the duty of the Chairman to prevent waste of time, and when he feels that any item under discussion has been adequately dealt with, he should propose to the meeting the closure of that business, and with approval, pass on to the next item on the agenda.

Terms, Rules, and Procedure

Motion

A Motion is a proposition submitted for discussion and vote. It must be positive in its wording and declare an opinion or call for a course of action – or both.

Resolution

A Resolution is a Motion which has been put to the vote and carried.

Amendment

When a Motion is before the meeting an Amendment is a proposition to change the words of the Motion as a whole, or to change certain words, or to add or delete words anywhere in the Motion.

Point of Order

A Point of Order is an objection raised by a member of the audience on the grounds that a speaker is departing from the subject under discussion, or that the Standing Orders are not being observed, or that the recognised rules of debate are not being operated, or that the speaker is using offensive language.

Substantive Motion

When an Amendment is voted on and carried by a majority it replaces or alters the original Motion and then becomes known as the Substantive Motion, to which new Amendments can be moved, providing they are not the same in wording or principle as that in the original Motion which was lost.

Direct Negative

A Direct negative is a proposed amendment to a Motion which offers no alternative proposition but simply seeks to negate the whole Motion. A Direct Negative must therefore always be ruled out of order by the Chairman, since its purpose can be achieved simply by voting against the Motion; and it is thus unnecessary.

Reference Back

Reference Back is a proposition against a report which is under discussion, and may refer to the whole report or a section of it. It means that the meeting does not approve of the report, and wishes the committee which was responsible for drafting it, to alter it in accordance with the objection specified by the mover of the Reference Back.

The Question Be Put

To move that the question be put, means that the discussion should cease and the vote should be taken on the Motion (or Amendment if any) which is before the meeting.

Next Business

Moving Next Business means that the meeting should immediately proceed to the next item of business. It can be moved at any time in reference to any item on the agenda, but if it is moved and carried whilst a Motion or an Amendment is under discussion it dismisses the Motion and Amendment without any vote being taken on them. If Next Business is not carried, then the meeting resumes discussion on the original Motion and Amendment, and thereafter takes the vote on them in the usual way.

Rules of Debate

A Chairman must have knowledge of the Rules of Debate, otherwise he cannot efficiently control discussions on Motions and Amendments, etc. This knowledge is especially necessary when the discussion becomes controversial and numerous propositions are moved.

Except where Standing Orders state to the contrary, the following rules affecting the rights of speech are those which operate in general practice at all ordinary meetings.

All persons moving and seconding Motions and Amendments, etc., and all those who participate in the discussion, must do so standing. The speaker then “has the floor”. The only exception to this rule is in committee meetings. Of course if the speaker is physically disabled and unable to stand with ease the Chairman can give him permission to address the meeting without rising to his feet.

A speaker must address his remarks to the Chairman and not to any individual member of the audience even though he may be replying to the previous remarks of an individual.

The mover of a Motion has the right to speak when introducing his Motion and the right to reply to the discussion as the last speaker, before the vote is taken.

If there is nobody willing to second the Motion, after it has been moved, the Motion falls, which means that no discussion can be permitted on it, and the Chairman must pass on to next business.

The seconder of a Motion has the right to speak when seconding but, unlike the mover, he has no right to reply. If he formally seconds the Motion without speaking he has the right to speak during the discussion on it, but he cannot speak twice.

If, during the discussion, the mover wishes to withdraw his motion, he cannot do so without the consent of the seconder and the meeting.

The mover of an Amendment has the right to speak only when introducing it. He has no right of reply to the discussion.

Those taking part in discussion on a Motion are only permitted to speak once. Anyone who has already spoken on the original Motion loses the right to move or second an Amendment to that Motion.

Course: No Woman, No Revolution

14052, Hannington, Rules of Debate, 1950

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